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Eastern Asia Christian Conference.

The Church in East Asia; Findings of the East Asian Christian Conference held at Bangkok, Thailand, December 3-11, 1949.

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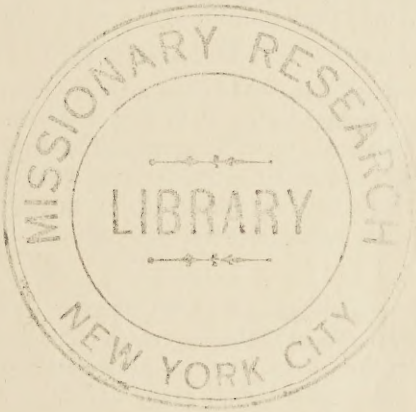
THE CHURCH IN EAST ASIA



Findings of the East Asian Christian Conference

held at Bangkok, Thailand, December 3-11, 1949

Introduction

35 Christian leaders delegated by national Christian councils in twelve nations of the Orient met at Bangkok, Thailand, from December 3 to 11, 1949. Held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council, the group met to plan closer cooperation between Protestant church bodies in the Orient as part of the world-wide ecumenical movement. They also made an assessment of the place and function of the Christian churches in newly-forming Asian societies and issued "an urgent summons" for more vigorous evangelism.

The three documents printed in this pamphlet are the findings adopted by the East Asian Christian Conference, first of its kind ever held in the Orient. They constitute the major lines of the task of Christianity in an area populated by over one-half of the human race.

Delegates of the following nations attended the conference: Australia, Burma, Ceylon, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaya, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand. Observers, consultants and officers of parent organizations, twenty-nine in all, came from the following countries: Denmark, France, French Indo-China, the Netherlands, Okinawa, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States.

Reporting the conference, Dr. John Mackay of the U.S.A., president of the International Missionary Council, declared: "What I have seen in East Asia has committed me more basically than ever to the belief that Jesus Christ shall reign and that, however long this revolutionary period may continue, we ourselves are going to witness unthought-of triumphs of the Gospel and our successors are going to witness even more. This is certain, because Christianity is never so creative and redemptive as when world orders are being dissolved, as they now are in the abysmal void of East Asia."

Message

The East Asian Christian Conference has met here in Bangkok as members of the Christian Church from twelve countries in Asia, and conscious of our privilege in being enabled thus to meet and of our responsibility as disciples of Jesus Christ, at a moment of grave peril and great opportunity in the history of this continent, we are constrained to send this message to our fellow-Christians in the countries which we represent.

We believe that it is God Himself who has made it possible for us to hold this first meeting of the representatives of the churches of Eastern Asia at such a time as this. Many of our countries have in the recent past endured great suffering and distress. All have entered upon a period of far-reaching change and upheaval. Some have entered —or are now entering—with mingled hope and fear upon the tasks which follow a newly-won freedom. Others are in the throes of internal revolution and continuing civil war. All are conscious of new and powerful forces in the life of Asia which hold possibilities both of good and evil for the future.

Amid all the turmoil of the time we bear witness afresh to the eternal truth of the Gospel, the truth that the world has a Lord, a Judge and a Saviour—Jesus Christ. Constrained by His love and directed by His plain command we declare again that the Gospel is the saving truth for this as for every generation, and we urge upon the churches of Eastern Asia the duty of making the Gospel known to every creature.

In the struggle to found their national life upon the principles of freedom and justice, our peoples are threatened not only by forces which explicitly deny these principles, but also by the fundamental inability of unredeemed human nature to implement them even when they are explicitly accepted. But these very conditions constitute an urgent summons to us who have been entrusted with the gospel of redemption, and there is widespread evidence of eager desire on the part of multitudes to hear this Gospel. Doors are wide open to us in many lands. But some of these doors are likely soon to be shut. In some countries restraints are already placed upon the entry of foreign missionaries. In other areas the church has come under governments which aim to prevent the organized propagation of Christian-

ity, and yet others are likely to come under the same conditions. These facts give a special urgency to our appeal to the churches of East Asia to undertake with a new sense of responsibility the task of so making Christ known in the power of the Holy Spirit that men may come to accept Him as Saviour and King, and to serve Him in the fellowship of His Church. In this task both younger and older churches are bound together in a partnership of obedience.

We have received many evidences of the unchanging power of the Gospel at work in our own day to change men and communities. The Lord's arm is not shortened that it cannot save. Even where every effort is made by hostile forces to prevent the preaching of the Gospel, the evidence shows that when the whole congregation—its minister and every member of it—is committed to the task of witness, nothing can stop its advance and that just when the power of Satan seems overwhelming, the Church is granted new discoveries of the power of God.

We give thanks to God for the growing desire in the churches of Eastern Asia for unity in the common life of Christ's Body. We rejoice in the steps which have already been taken to this end in several of our countries. But we acknowledge with shame and penitence that we continue to sin against the Lord in presenting a divided witness to the world He came to save. We believe that God has called the churches of Eastern Asia to a special part in the fulfilment of our Lord's unceasing prayer that we may all be one, that the world may believe, and we earnestly call upon all our churches to pray and work that His will may be done. The conversion of the world is the work of God. We are but His servants, and our greatest task is to give ourselves, with the whole Church, to unwearying prayer that the peoples of Eastern Asia may turn to Him and be saved.

And now the God of all Grace who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after ye have suffered a while make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever, Amen.

The Church in Social and Political Life

The Gospel proclaims that God's sovereignty includes all realms of life. Christ sitting at the right hand of God reigns and the Church owes it to the world to remind it constantly that it lives under His judgment and grace. It is not the challenge of any ideology but the knowledge of the love of God in Christ for man, that is the basis of the Church's social and political concern. In East Asia, the majority of people both in the rural and urban areas, live in conditions of abject poverty and under oppressive systems that cramp their personality; and it is the will of God that the church should witness to His redeeming love through an active concern for human freedom and justice.

The churches are called to be penitent for their sin of disobedience in this matter, before they can be renewed by God and be made channels of God's concern for man in society. This spiritual renewal will manifest itself in a transformation of the social life of the Church itself.

The struggle for and the attainment of political freedom has awakened the hitherto submerged peoples of East Asia to a new sense of dignity and historical mission. Those are basic elements in the revolutionary ferment which are at work in the contemporary revolts and power-conflicts in Asia. Ideologies have arisen to interpret this revolution to the common man and to lead him in his search for his destiny. Ideological conflicts are becoming increasingly integral to the political and social life of East Asia. The victory of communist leadership in China has created an essentially new situation there and at the same time made the tensions more acute in other Asian lands.

The churches dare not assume a purely passive, indifferent or neutral attitude towards the crucial political and social issues of the times. It is, of course, not the task of the Church as such, to enter into the arena of party-politics or to pronounce judgment on the technical aspects of government and society. However, it is the responsibility of the Church to rediscover and proclaim both to its own members as well as to those outside the basic truths declared in the Bible about the life of men in society and in the State, which no individual or government can regard with impunity.

In this creative stage of Asian life, with its possibilities for good and evil, with its discovery of the worth of the human person, but also with its tendencies towards nihilism and totalitarianism, the peoples of Asia, and particularly the younger generation, need the prophetic warning which only the Church can give about the foundations of human dignity and the common life. No fear of "politics," no fear of the consequences can excuse silence in such a decisive moment. The watchman who sees danger must blow his trumpet in the name of the Lord to warn the people.

Moral advice and the proclamation of moral ideas are insufficient. Only that which transcends morals, namely, the knowledge of the ultimate accountability of man and society to God and of the grace of God by which men being forgiven forgive one another, can be the foundation of personal responsibility and responsible society. The lack of the knowledge of God as the Judge of history is at the root of all tendencies towards nihilism and totalitarianism, in Asia and elsewhere. The proclamation of the Word of God, with a profound sense of its relevance to the ideological and political conflicts of the Orient, is therefore the central task of the Church in Asia.

In the final analysis, the prophetic ministry of the Church in the social and political order depends on the Church being truly a community of persons rooted in the Word of God, that is, worshipping congregations in which human worth and mutual responsibility are acknowledged and realized, and from which love goes out in work of service to the neighborhood. A true Christian congregation is the most effective prophetic witness to the divine righteousness in society, and the only answer to the challenge of political ideologies that view man solely in terms of his social and political functions. The Christian congregation has revolutionary significance in the East Asian political situation.

In considering communism, the Christian must distinguish between the social revolution which seeks justice and the totalitarian ideology which interprets and perverts it. The Christian Church must welcome the demand of the peoples for a fuller participation in the life of society at the level where power is exercised, since this is an expression of human dignity; and the rise of communism is a judgment on the churches for their failure to do so. Nevertheless the struggle for justice frustrates itself if the evil forces inherent in any human situation are not held in check. Because communism lacks a conception of the independence of moral reality over against power, it denies the supremacy of the moral law over power-politics and hence in the long run defeats the very purpose of the social revolution.

This ideological error in communism, which turns a social revolution for justice into a new oppression arises out of the self-righteousness of its militant atheism; and at this point the conflict between Christianity and communism is fundamental.

The political situation vis-à-vis communism varies widely in different countries. The revolution in China, though led by communists, may not yet have manifested fully the evil consequences of the moral relativism integral to communism; and the churches' witness in China may be specifically to seek to provide a moral and religious foundation for the new sense of social freedom and economic justice among the people. In those countries where the possibility exists of transforming the social order democratically so that the means employed may not destroy the ends of justice, a true social democracy may be the answer to communism. We must recognize at this point however, that democratic institutions and values divorced from their original Christian motive exist in a moral and religious vacuum and tend to break down. The Christian has the task of redefining and reinforcing these institutions and values in the light of the Christian faith, supplying a moral dynamic which they lack today. The fundamental rights of the human person cannot endure except as they are acknowledged as derived from man's relation to God in Christ. The Christian truth alone can judge and save democracy from breaking down in the face of the forces of totalitarianism of the left and the right, and make it truly social.

A duty rests upon the churches in East Asia to help through literature and other means both those within their fold and outside, especially youth, to understand the true nature of the social crisis in which they are, and the positive way to accept its challenge in the historical situation in which they are placed. The churches should take the initiative in bridging the gap between the Church and the organized labor in town and village; and there is a whole problem of communication in this connection, to which the churches should address themselves through evangelists who identify themselves in a costly way with the day to day struggles of labor and peasant for justice.

The most fundamental freedom is religious freedom. Nations are not truly free unless they recognize that each citizen has the right to decide for himself what religion he will profess, and that each religion has the right to proclaim its convictions without interference. We are glad to find that in most Asian lands these truths have been stated in the national constitutions. We hope that the religious liberty clause of the United Nations' Charter of Human

Rights will be increasingly acknowledged as the standard of action in this field and urge that the churches endeavor to ensure that the Covenant of Human Rights, now being discussed in the United Nations Assembly, shall be ratified by their respective governments.

But we also are aware that the official acceptance of these principles often goes together with theories and policies which are in fact a denial of religious freedom. We hear of legislation which makes Christian evangelism virtually impossible in certain areas. We hear of discrimination against Christians and of material advantages being offered them if they will adopt the dominant religion of the country. We also are concerned about the trend in certain nations for the state to assume responsibility for the organization of the religious life, which is the province of religious communities and not of the state.

The Christian churches and national Christian councils must take an energetic stand against all these infringements of religious freedom and assist in educating the adherents of all religions towards a fuller understanding of the nature of religious liberty. Ignorance among the members of the churches of the issues involved seriously affects the cause of religious liberty. The repudiation of religious liberty by certain churches gravely weakens the Christian effort to defend the victims of religious oppression. The Christian Church cannot accept anything less than the freedom which allows it to be what it is, namely, the body through which the Lord Jesus Christ continually calls men and women from all nations, races and religions into communion with Himself. The Church dare not become a static minority; it must ever remain an ever expanding, dynamic, free and open society.

Finally, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the Christian hope rests not on the historical situation in which we find ourselves but on God's revelation on the meaning and the end of history in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. While therefore it is the Christian responsibility to work or defend a political and social order, informed by the Christian understanding of man and his destiny, as a sign and witness to the Christian hope, the breakdown of political hopes does not destroy the freedom of the Christian man and the Christian Church. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away reserved in heaven for you." (1 Peter. 1:3, 4)

The Proclamation of The Gospel in East Asia

The Gospel of the Crucified and Risen Lord is God's message for all times, and for all conditions of men. It should be preached in its fullness, both in its own right and in its own light. Its very presentation can create the needs which it alone can satisfy, and raise the question which it alone can answer. But the evangelist should always have regard for the contemporary needs and problems in any human situation which make aspects of the message specially relevant.

The supreme need of the hour in the Younger Churches is for a fuller experience of the living reality of Christ, for the manifestation of the new man in Christ, and for a closer acquaintance with the Bible as the dynamic Word. Fellowship with the Lord and the study of His Word are the essential prerequisites for the kind of theology which will be both loyal to the Divine Revelation and expressive of the life and thought of the people of our lands when renewed by Christ.

We believe at the same time that the Christian message may be made more challenging if it is presented in close relation to the special needs of the human situation in any given time, and also if it adopts and utilizes certain values in the traditional culture of each people.

In the lands of East Asia, the impact of Western ideals of individual worth, economic justice and political democracy has brought about a crisis of culture. The task of reconciling the new social values with the old cultural heritage has not been achieved. Some of the old social institutions have broken down. Others, such as the caste system in India, are being subjected to serious attack. In China, the change has been profound and widespread.

In many lands, however, attempts are being made to find the needed spiritual dynamic from their ancient faiths to support and safeguard the new social ideals. But the claim that the ancestral faith of these lands can provide the needed inspiration has not been proved. The intelligentsia are no less confused and frustrated than the common man.

One serious cause for concern is the noticeable deterioration in the moral integrity of the peoples of East Asian lands at a time when

the demands of the new democratic order call for high standards of responsibility in civic relations. The effort made by non-Christian thought-systems to establish a satisfactory basis for righteousness challenge the Christian evangelist to preach the Gospel as the one sure hope of East Asia.

Preaching the message, then, in this contemporary context, let us call men to the Christian faith. God has created man in His image; in Christ, He is redemptively active in our world; His sovereignty is the ultimate factor in world history; His judgment, at the end of time, will be pronounced on man, and by His grace the just shall inherit His kingdom. This faith alone can be the one sure source of strength for us men in our common quest to secure and possess those ends of human worthfulness, economic justice and true democracy.

The occasion calls for a bold declaration of the message of the Gospel, preaching the Word with pointed reference to the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. But the occasion also demands of us and the churches of the lands of East Asia, that we show forth in our own lives the fruits of God's forgiveness, and demonstrate through service of our fellow-men that in renewed consecration of our powers to the will of Almighty God there is hope of man's natural gifts and talents being sanctified and transfigured.

Since the Gospel has to be preached in all the languages of East Asia, and the Christian life lived in all its various cultural and social situations it is essential that the churches should engage in a much more thorough study of the language, literature, music, art and social structure of their peoples, so that they may know more clearly how these are to be used, adapted or rejected for the service of the Gospel and the Church. It is our conviction that the life and witness of our churches is at present seriously weakened by failure to discharge this duty.

In this endeavor, it is important that a careful study be made of the theological criteria which will guide the Younger Churches, if they are to make their distinctive contribution in life and thought to the ecumenical fellowship. We therefore recommend to the different national Christian councils that departments of study be set up in association with similar activities of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council to stimulate serious research in the anthropology and the classical religions of the people of our lands in relation to the Christian faith.

In order that the Christian Message may make the fullest impact

on our world, we further recommend that the churches in East Asia dedicate themselves in particular to the following tasks:

- The strengthening of the liturgical life of the Church so that all members may take a fuller part in the worship of God;
- A deliberate effort to enlist the entire membership of the churches for evangelism, to train congregations, small groups, youth groups and selected individuals for this task, and to secure the whole-hearted service of every minister of the Church in this part of his duty;
- The training of lay members for Christian obedience in the particular conditions of their several vocations;
- The early completion of the process by which the responsibility of the missionary task in every place is transferred to the church in that place;
- The development of plans consistent with the principles of comity by which every church can have some share in the evangelization of areas other than its own, so that a sense of responsibility for the world-wide mission of the Church may increasingly become a normal part of the life of every Christian;
- A much more determined effort to distribute the Bible and Christian literature throughout the whole of Eastern Asia.

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